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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 003636

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: CHARGE PRESSES MFA FOR GOE RESPONSE TO POLITICAL CRISIS

REF: A. ADDIS ABABA 3129

1B. ADDIS ABABA 3128

Classified By: Charge Vicki Huddleston for reason 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: Charge took the opportunity of a summons to the MFA on Sept. 5 to press Deputy Minister Tekeda Alemu on the GOE's response to the current political crisis. Charge argued that while the international community and others urged the opposition to take up its newly-won seats in parliament, it was also incumbent upon the GOE to take steps to restore credibility to Ethiopian institutions and reduce tensions in Addis Ababa. Tekeda took the point on board, but wondered whether PM Meles retained sufficient political capital and flexibility to undertake such initiatives. End Summary.

12. (C) Deputy Foreign Minister Tekeda summoned the Charge on very short notice September 5 to deliver a note protesting the EU Election Observer Mission's conduct in Ethiopia. Pol/Econ Counselor accompanied the Charge, while Tekeda was joined by Director for American Affairs Ayalew. Septel includes a report on that conversation as well as the text of the note. The Charge took the opportunity of the high-level MFA call to ask Tekeda for his thoughts on next steps to resolve the country's current political crisis. Bio note: Tekeda is a career diplomat who has served as (political appointee) Foreign Minister Seyoum's deputy for well over a decade.

We Know You're Upset -- But What Are You Gonna Do?

13. (C) Charge told Tekeda that while she could understand in some measure the GOE's concerns about the EU-EOM report, what was really important was to focus on what happens next. It was clear to everyone that tensions in Addis were rising over the disputed election results. Would opposition leaders be willing and able to control popular anger and frustration, she asked? Tekeda replied that he expected the bulk of the opposition's newly elected parliamentarians to take their seats. He admitted, however, that there was a large mass of "lumpen" in the capital that leaders in the CUD could easily mobilize for mischief if they wished. Tekeda estimated that 40 percent of the young adults in Addis were unemployed, plenty of "combustible material" to cause a problem if politicians were irresponsible. EU-EOM head Ana Gomes had already poured fuel on the fire, he added.

14. (C) The Charge returned to the point that the future was still largely in the GOE's hands. People both within Ethiopia and in the international community were looking to the GOE to do something to calm the situation. She noted that the international donor community hoped that both sides of the current dispute would work together to move forward, or everyone risked falling backward. Ethiopia stood at an important crossroads in its democratic evolution. The Charge underscored that Ethiopia's opposition leaders had far less experience in government, and so the world was looking primarily to the GOE for leadership. A public message emphasizing the GOE's readiness to work with all parties to develop a truly open, multiparty system would be a good start, she said.

No Way Back -- But is There a Way Out?

15. (C) Tekeda recognized that the GOE did have a greater responsibility to manage the situation. Tekeda said that while he was not an EPRDF member, he believed that the coalition's leadership understood the political sea change that had taken place as a result of the May elections. The ruling party's acceptance of this reality was evident when the EPRDF ceded control of Addis Ababa -- the historical center of power in Ethiopia. The difficulty, however, was that the top leadership in the ruling coalition was not sure that opposition leaders from the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) would "play ball." While Ana Gomes was fueling anger with the EU-EOM report, he said, some key opposition leaders in Washington (note: from the UEDF) issued a statement calling for public protests in early October.

Members of the governing Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) were wondering whether such people were really ready to engage with the GOE within the Constitutional order. Tekeda confided that GOE officials like him could argue that the GOE had to lead the way out of the current crisis, but the response from EPRDF leaders was, "how can I trust our opponents to cooperate?"

16. (C) Tekeda lamented that moderate leaders in the opposition, such as the CUD's Berhanu Nega and the UEDF's Beyene Petros, did not seem to have the upper hand in internal party debates. The UEDF was extremely dependent on financial support from the United States, while the CUD was somewhat less so. Tekeda argued that most Ethiopian Diaspora leaders had ties to the former Mengistu regime, known as the DERG. If they were in Ethiopia, he said, they would be in jail for crimes committed under that government. It was ironic, Tekeda remarked, that the United States was the source of extremism in Ethiopia's current situation. There was still time, however, for opposition moderates to reassert control, but they would have to "come out" and make their good intentions known. Tekeda believed that the GOE was still open to dialogue with them.

Help the Moderate Opposition Help You

17. (C) Pol/Econ Counselor noted that the GOE could take certain measures on its own initiative -- with or without direct negotiations with the opposition -- that might lower the level of tension and stem popular anger against the government. The GOE might express willingness to revisit the package of changes to parliamentary procedures that the ruling coalition hurried through in the dying days of the previous parliament, for example. Re-establishing the opposition's access to the state-run broadcast media would be another potential confidence-building measure. Such steps could improve the GOE's tarnished image on the street in Addis and make it easier for moderate opposition leaders to justify taking their seats in parliament. Positive steps would also make it easier for the international community to press the opposition on participating in parliament.

18. (C) Tekeda took the suggestions on board, and indicated that changes in media's conduct should not be so difficult if a climate of greater trust existed. At the same time, he noted that "PM Meles has only so much political capital. Is he really in a position to take more steps toward the opposition? The PM cannot stray too far from his followers in the EPRDF. He lost a lot of capital with them by allowing Eritrea to secede. He also brought the EPRDF to this point (in the election/democratization process). What did they get? The lost Addis." Tekeda commented while Meles was strong, he was not all powerful, and internal EPRDF debates were now common.

19. (C) The Charge concluded by saying that the international community wanted to work with the GOE to promote a peaceful solution to the current impasse, but that the GOE had to be willing to address the problems that existed with the electoral process and Ethiopian institutions. Everyone would be looking for GOE leadership. "I'm worried that the ruling coalition has decided that it can't give anymore, when now is precisely the time when more initiative is most needed," she concluded. Tekeda replied that the most difficult period seemed to have passed now.

110. (C) COMMENT: It is unclear how open members of PM Meles' inner circle are to new initiatives that could ease tensions and pave the way for a successful new parliament in Ethiopia, but our suggestions will no doubt reach EPRDF ears.
HUDDLESTON